



Danielle Moss (far left), at the YWCA of the City of New York's annual Potential to Power Girls Symposium in June 2014.

Courtesy of YWCANYC

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by [Chris Peak](#) on January 3, 2017

## Where Does the YWCA Go From Here?

### **CEO Danielle Moss Lee, a NationSwell Council member, on keeping the 158-year-old organization relevant for today's young women.**

After the [YWCA of the City of New York](#) sold its uptown Lexington Avenue headquarters — its home for nearly a century — and moved downtown in 2005, the organization was looking to reinvent itself. Enter Danielle Moss Lee, a former teacher and administrator with a doctorate in education and decades of experience in nonprofit leadership. After taking the reins as the YWCA's CEO in 2012, Moss Lee expanded the nonprofit's after-school and summer programs while redoubling efforts to reach out to girls of color in underserved neighborhoods. NationSwell spoke with Moss Lee about the new direction for a 158-year-old charity at the YWCA's headquarters in Lower Manhattan.

#### **What's the YWCA's biggest need right now?**

Ensuring the future sustainability of the organization. We've been out of the game for a little bit. How do you make something that's 158 years old new again, so that people care about it and want it to continue, in terms of manpower, woman-power, volunteerism? We've got 2,500 kids whose lives we hope to impact in some way. It's not all the kids in the city, but we can do our best to do our part.

#### **What innovations in your field are you most excited about right now?**

I like the questions that young activists are asking, because it positions us for a different America. We can say without a doubt that all of our lives have been materially and visibly changed by the civil rights movement. But now

we're addressing issues around institutional and structural racism that I don't think prior generations fully understood: Health services, education, the police and the banking system all really conspire together to advantage some and disadvantage others. I'm excited about these new movements. Protesting and social media campaigns are important. I hope that, at the end of this, the way we live and experience our daily lives will be similarly transformed like they were with desegregation and all of the access and opportunities that civil rights opened up.

### **What's the best advice you have ever been given on leadership?**

The best advice I've gotten over my career was to be someone that I would want to follow myself. It's been important advice because it's made me more conscious that who I am and how I show up is really important to the people around me when I'm in a leadership role. It keeps you honest and conscious.

### **Where do you find your inner motivation?**

It's always different, but one thing I think about is all the kids I'm *not* serving. I hear lots of folks in this sector say of college-access or girls' programming: "We have 200 girls" or "We have 1,000 girls," whatever the number is. But then when I think about how many girls actually live in this city, that's what keeps me going.

Years ago, I was teaching a graduate course on urban youth policy, and one day the discussion got really personal. A young woman getting her master's degree told this story of how her family's apartment had burned down in Brooklyn. At first, friends and family were willing to house them. As the months dragged on, they went into a homeless shelter. At some point, her mother, in a desperate attempt to provide for her kids, made the decision to join the Armed Forces. The student said, "Do you realize we lived in that shelter with no adult and nobody noticed?" And then she said, "I didn't know that there were middle-class black people. I didn't know for a long time that something else was possible for my life." A lot of mentoring is focused around Manhattan. Let's be real, people aren't going out to Coney Island (where the YWCA has programming) or other far-flung Brooklyn neighborhoods like Flatbush, East New York and Brownsville. It's always at the convenience of the volunteer, but that's not necessarily where the greatest need is. I can always recall that student's voice asking, "Where were you?" — to which I didn't really have an answer. She said, "All these civic organizations are always talking about all the work they do in the community, but I never saw them." Nobody asked her if she wanted to go to college. That's our job.

## **How do you make something that's 158 years old new again, so that people care about it and want it to continue?**

### **What's on your nightstand right now?**

["Collaborative Intelligence: Thinking with People Who Think Differently"](#) [by Dawna Markova and Angie McArthur]. It's really about how you develop teams with people who just think differently. I started to think about this because there's been a lot of emphasis in some new progressive nonprofits in the sector around organizational fit and building a specific kind of culture within their organizations to drive results. There's a value in that. But a lot of those organizations have challenges around having a diverse staff.

I was listening to two managers have a semi-debate. A young white woman was talking about two of her staff members: Her white staff member was really great with data, Excel spreadsheets and metrics — things she really valued — but this staff person wasn't as good at relating to young people and doing outreach to families. And so while the person of color was much more relatable with the young people in the organization, it was almost like her skill set wasn't seen as a value. We all operate predominantly with different sides of our brain. How can we tease away some of the judgment that comes with very different strengths and make sure that we're not using this idea of "fit" really to only work with people who look like us, share our experiences and perspective? You're probably not growing if everyone agrees with everything you say.

### **What's your perfect day look like?**

No bad news, and a big check in the mail — in that order.

### **What's your proudest accomplishment?**

I recently had the opportunity to have a reunion with students I previously worked with at another organization. First of all, to see them now as college-educated adults and hear all the amazing things they were doing was a reward in itself. Back when I was working that job, I was also raising my daughter and going to graduate school. I remember one of those kids saying, "I didn't know anybody else who had a doctorate. When I came into your office and saw your degrees on the wall, I knew I couldn't just get a bachelor's. Tell me: What do you have to do to get a master's degree? What's a dissertation?"

I'm just blown away by the number of students, many first-generation college students, who have graduate degrees. That changes not just the trajectory of their lives, but also their families' for years to come. It was nice to know that

I had that kind of impact.

To learn more about the NationSwell Council, [click here](#).

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